

Chapter 1 Introductory: 'We are all Home Rulers today'

You know that you and I have agreed a hundred times that until England agrees, H[ome] R[ule] will never pass.¹

On 22 November 1918, an election manifesto issued by David Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law, on behalf of their Liberal-Conservative Coalition, was published in the British press. It called for, amongst other things, a just and lasting peace settlement, fair treatment for the soldier and sailor and better housing and educational facilities for the mass of the British people. It is unlikely that the British electorate, its eyes fastened upon these bread-and-butter issues, paid much attention to the last item in the Coalition agenda, an extract from which read:

So long as the Irish question remains unsettled there can be no political peace either in the United Kingdom or in the Empire, and we regard it as one of the first obligations of British statesmanship to explore all practical paths towards the settlement of this grave and difficult question, on the basis of self-government.

It is even more doubtful whether the voters who returned the Coalition to power in December 1918 on the basis of that manifesto realized that they had, in effect, given the government their formal consent to liquidate a problem which had convulsed British opinion in two successive generations, in 1886 and in 1914, and which had threatened the peace and stability of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, as *The Times* noted on 26 March 1919, a significant landmark in British political history had been reached, for 'In principle Home Rule has passed beyond the scope of discussion. While its character, its extent and its limitations have to be reviewed afresh, we are all Home Rulers today'.

It is the purpose of this introductory chapter to investigate the nature of British opposition to Irish self-government in the nineteenth century; to suggest reasons why this opposition had withered away by 1918; and to describe the cargo of ideas with which Englishmen confronted the Irish question at the end of the First World War.

A convenient starting-point for this survey is 22 January 1801, when, as laid down by the Act of Union of 1800, representatives of the Irish Lords and Commons took their seats in the first parliament of the United

Kingdom. Irish questions had indeed vexed Englishmen long before 1801; but the Union thrust upon British statesmen and British public opinion direct responsibility for the good government of Ireland. It is doubtful, however, if contemporaries in Great Britain realized the nature of the responsibilities they had undertaken, for while the passing of the Act of Union aroused public controversy in Ireland, it slipped through the British parliament after a few languid debates. The bulk of the parliamentary Opposition was sulking in ineffectual secession; public attention was concentrated on the war with France; and it could be said of the transition from the parliament of Great Britain to that of the United Kingdom what Thurloe remarked of the transition from Oliver to Richard Cromwell in 1658: 'There is not a dog that wags his tongue, so great a calm are we in.'

This, however, proved to be the calm before the storm; the responsibilities so absent-mindedly acquired in 1801 came to demand and absorb official time and energy, break up British administrations, and introduce sharp racial and religious antagonisms into British public life. Questions such as Catholic Emancipation in Ireland, and Irish demands for denominational education, provoked anti-Catholic sentiment in Great Britain; and for the rest of the time British public opinion was content to let matters take their course in Ireland, until some dramatic event, such as the Fenian conspiracy of the 1860s, burst upon the scene and reminded Englishmen that Irish problems existed. The balance, of course, was not wholly unfavourable; for, despite the fact that Englishmen had, to say the least, an incomplete understanding of the problems with which they were faced, they were not wholly inflexible in their attitudes towards Ireland. A good deal more state intervention was possible in Ireland than in England; and a consensus of opinion on certain Irish questions was not lacking. After all, it was a Tory Prime Minister who conceded Catholic Emancipation in 1829; all sections of British opinion acquiesced in, though some of them did not pretend to like, Gladstone's land legislation and his disestablishment of the Church of Ireland; and when the Unionists were in power almost continuously between 1886 and 1905, they took upon themselves the responsibility for a scheme of land purchase which transformed Irish society.

But the one Irish issue on which it seemed there could be no consensus of opinion and no compromise was that of the repeal or modification of the Act of Union itself. It may have been, as G. M. Young remarked, that 'when England had conceded Catholic emancipation against her own Protestants, and insisted on agrarian reform against the Irish landlords,

and both in vain, the logic of history left her no alternative but to concede all the rest';² but this was a logical development which most Englishmen were determined to resist to the utmost. Other reforms might be conceded, albeit with much bickering and bad grace; but there could be no concession over the Union. In 1843 Robert Peel stated that he was prepared to endure civil war rather than yield to Daniel O'Connell's mass movement in Ireland for repeal of the Act of Union.³ This was a foretaste of typical English reactions to the parliamentary movement for independence which originated in Isaac Butt's Home Government Association, and which came nearest to success under the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

On three occasions, between 1886 and 1912, proposals for the establishment of an Irish parliament in Dublin with an executive responsible to it were presented to the British public – by Gladstone in 1886 and 1893, and by Asquith in 1912. None of these proposals was put into operation; but if a parliament on the lines laid down in these bills had been established, its power would have been narrowly circumscribed. In each of the home rule bills important services were reserved to the imperial parliament, whose ultimate authority was carefully stressed. Such measures fell far short of the Irish desire for full national independence, and certainly aimed at setting very firm bounds to the march of a nation. Nevertheless, Englishmen refused to accept even these limited measures of devolution; and it was from the 'English' section of 'British' public opinion that the most determined and sustained opposition came. In a general election in 1886, caused by the defeat of Gladstone's first home rule bill in the House of Commons, Wales and Scotland each returned a majority of members who supported home rule; whereas out of a total of 465 seats in England, 339 went to men who supported the Unionist cause.* A majority in English constituencies was maintained in 1892, despite the fact that Gladstonian Liberals and Irish home rulers by now enjoyed an overall lead of forty seats in the House of Commons;⁴ and the Liberal government which introduced a home rule bill in 1912 depended for its majority on the votes of Irish, Scottish and Welsh members. When Lord Rosebery 'blurted out' in the House of Lords in March 1894 that 'before Irish

*Out of 30 Welsh constituencies, 23 returned Gladstonian Liberals; and out of 72 Scottish seats, Unionists and Liberal Unionists secured only 29; see the analysis of the election results in *The Times*, 20 July 1886. John Morley analysed the popular vote as follows: 'England had returned opponents of the liberal policy in the proportion of two and a half to one against its friends; but Scotland approved in the proportion of three to two, Wales approved by five to one, and Ireland by four and a half to one' (Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, 3 vols. [London, 1903], vol. iii, pp. 345–6).

Home Rule is conceded by the Imperial Parliament England, as the predominant Member of the partnership of the Three Kingdoms, will have to be convinced of its justice and equity', he spoke, not only with embarrassing frankness, but with accuracy.⁵

Englishmen did not find it difficult to put forward sound and logical arguments why Ireland should not have self-government. They warned that the forces of Irish Nationalism had as their basic aim the confiscation of Irish property, and that when the 'masses' had defeated the 'classes' in Ireland, England would be next on the list. There were imperial considerations as well: if Ireland received self-government, India would follow, and the empire would disintegrate by chain reaction. Moreover, an independent Ireland would offer a base from which any hostile continental power could launch an attack upon England. And, finally, there was the argument that a Catholic-controlled parliament in Dublin would use its power to make life intolerable for the Protestant minority in Ireland, and particularly for the Protestants in the north-east corner of the province of Ulster.⁶ These and similar objections were most forcibly put forward by A. V. Dicey, Vinerian Professor of English Law at the University of Oxford, in his book *England's Case Against Home Rule*, first published at the height of the controversy over the first home rule bill in 1886. 'Home Rule', he argued, was 'the half-way house to Separation'; and separation would mean a loss to Great Britain of money and men, and would be interpreted as a sign of declining strength and spirit in Great Britain.⁷

This was all very well; but even such logical arguments could not disguise a fundamental contradiction in English attitudes to Irish self-government. After all, Englishmen were enthusiastic supporters of European movements for independence in the nineteenth century, and yet they saw no inconsistency in suppressing a nationalist movement in Ireland. They might argue that to concede home rule to the Irish would set a precedent for the rest of the empire; but at the same time English statesmen were themselves establishing precedents in the empire by conceding to Canada, and later to South Africa, wider powers than were envisaged in any home rule measures. They might claim that they were protecting the rights of property, but they bought out the Irish landlords in an effort to 'kill home rule with kindness'.

Behind such reasoned arguments lay something more fundamental; a kind of English national feeling which, Professor D. B. Quinn has remarked, 'has been very inadequately explored by her historians.'⁸ The English attitude to Wales, Scotland and Ireland was, perhaps, influenced by a certain view of English history. The English monarchy, based firmly

on the south-east of England, had gradually come to extend its power over the rest of the British Isles. Wales was the first country to be conquered and absorbed by the ruling power; and in 1707 the Union between England and Scotland transformed these two British nations 'into one inseparable state governed by one and the same sovereign'.⁹ Finally, in 1801, the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland completed the process by which a single system of government was extended over the whole of the British Isles; the ascendancy of the English language was confirmed; and English wealth was the basis of British power. These developments bred an attitude of conscious superiority to non-English elements; and the English Unionism which flourished in the nineteenth century was, paradoxically, a kind of English nationalism. The arguments put forward by A. V. Dicey assumed the existence of one 'British nation', for they were grounded, he maintained, 'on the interests of the greater number of the citizens of the State.'¹⁰ Furthermore, to concede self-government to Ireland would run counter to the course of English history, and would 'undo the work not only of Pitt, but of Somers, of Henry VII, and of Edward I'.¹¹

From this point of view, Irish Nationalism was not a legitimate movement for self-government which could be applauded in the same way as Italian or Belgian nationalism; it was an attempt to destroy the integrity of the United Kingdom. Since there was but one 'British' nation, it was necessary to argue the Irish nation out of existence. Irish Nationalism was a 'sham and a fraud', and if the 'English were not simply Teutonic, still less were the Irish Celtic'.¹² It is not difficult to see how such arguments, with their undertone of racialism, could lead to prejudice and bigotry. A. V. Dicey was careful to stress that his case was not grounded on a disregard of justice, or pride of power, and, above all, involved 'no unfriendliness to Irishmen, and no assumption, either tacit or express, that there has fallen to Irishmen a greater amount of either original or acquired sin than falls to other human beings'.¹³ But some Englishmen seemed to think that the Irish had been endowed with a double dose of original sin, and a good deal of acquired sin into the bargain. At St James's Hall, on 15 May 1886, Lord Salisbury declared:

The confidence you repose in people will depend something upon the habits they have acquired. Well, the habits the Irish have acquired are very bad. They have become habituated to the use of knives and slugs which is wholly inconsistent with the placing of unlimited confidence in them.¹⁴

The ferocious Fenian dynamiter portrayed in the cartoons of *Punch*, in truth, hardly seemed a fit person to exercise political power; and to this unfavourable image of the Irishman was added the fact that he was of a different religion to the vast majority of Englishmen. England was a Protestant monarchy, but the Irishman's religion came from Rome, from a 'foreign church'. In 1853, *The Times*, for example, doubted whether 'a true Papist can be a good subject'.¹⁵

When these political, religious and racial prejudices are put together, it is not surprising that the question of home rule for Ireland should cause, in Gladstone's words, a 'mighty heave in the body politic',¹⁶ and, as one generation of Englishmen succeeded another, the cleavage introduced into British political life lasted, and grew more bitter. After a general election in January 1910, the Irish Parliamentary Party under John Redmond held the balance of power at Westminster, and the 'Parliament Act' of 1911, which deprived the House of Lords of its absolute veto on legislation, removed the last constitutional bulwark against home rule. But when Asquith introduced his bill in April 1912, Unionist Ulster prepared itself to resist by force of arms incorporation in a Dublin parliament, and a substantial section of British public opinion rallied in support. The Unionist Party under Bonar Law took the lead. At a gathering of Unionists at Blenheim Palace on 29 July 1913, Law acknowledged the fact that the government could carry its bill through the House of Commons. But there were 'things stronger than parliamentary majorities'; and if an attempt were made to force Protestant Ulster under Dublin rule, 'I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I should not be prepared to support them, and in which, in my belief, they would not be supported by the overwhelming majority of the British people.'¹⁷ It is with some justification that Law's biographer remarks that 'Such a tone had not been heard in England since the debates of the Long Parliament';¹⁸ and some Englishmen were prepared to support these words with action. A British League for the support of Ulster and the Union was founded to enlist Englishmen who would be prepared to fight for Ulster if civil war should occur, and a British Covenant on the lines of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant was organized to emphasize that the struggle was one waged for the survival of the United Kingdom.¹⁹

But even while the controversy was at its height, means of averting the catastrophe were being explored. It was not that persistent propaganda from the Irish Parliamentary Party or from English home rulers had made any kind of impression on English Unionists—Englishmen still did not accept the case for Irish self-government—it was rather the more

practical pressing need to prevent civil war. If the choice lay between some modification of the Act of Union, or an armed conflict to preserve the Union intact, then the former appeared the more attractive, or at any rate the less objectionable, alternative. This attitude can best be illustrated by a quotation from a leader which appeared in *The Times* on 30 April 1914:

We have constantly opposed the principle of Home Rule for Ireland and continue to do so. We should regard any form of settlement on the lines proposed, not with jubilation but with sorrow. For us, too, it would spell defeat and not victory. Yet there are some defeats more honourable than victory and we place the preservation of the internal peace of these realms, and the salvation of the Empire from disaster, above the cause of a single Parliament for the United Kingdom ...

The leaders of the Unionist Party also began to search for a compromise solution. In public, they confidently maintained that if a general election were held with Irish home rule as the main issue, the Unionists would secure a victory;²⁰ but privately, they were less sure of their ground. On 8 October 1913 Bonar Law explained to Lord Lansdowne the desirability of arranging some kind of settlement by consent, because even if the Opposition did manage to force the government to hold a general election, it was not certain that the Unionists would win it.²¹

From 1913, therefore, English Unionists were becoming increasingly aware of the possibility that they might be defending a losing cause; and although the British declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914 postponed the crisis, the decision taken by the Liberal government in September to place the home rule bill on the statute book was another setback for Unionist hopes of frustrating the establishment of a parliament in Dublin. It was true that Asquith had taken this step reluctantly, and after considerable pressure from the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond;²² and also true that in announcing the government's decision on 15 September 1914, Asquith gave an assurance that 'in spirit and in substance the Home Rule Bill will not and cannot come into operation until Parliament has had the fullest opportunity by an Amending Bill of altering, modifying, or qualifying its provisions in such a way as to secure ... the general consent both of Ireland and of the United Kingdom'.²³ Nevertheless, the bill was now part of the law of the land; and although in retrospect Nationalist rejoicings at their 'red-letter day' seem absurd, they had won a victory of a kind. Previously, Unionists in Great Britain had been able to pose as the defenders of the existing order,

and in their defence they could rely on the forces of English conservatism, upon what J. A. Spender defined as that 'powerful British section who held all methods to be lawful against the authors of the Parliament Act, and saw in the Irish question the chance of a final engagement in which the lost ground would be recovered'.²⁴ But now that the home rule bill was on the statute book, Unionists could only alter the situation by mounting a determined and sustained counter-attack. This meant that they must present a strong case for change to the British public. It is doubtful whether such a case, even in 1914, would have carried the day; and the impact of the Great War upon public opinion and upon British political life ensured that it was never put forward.

On the outbreak of war, the immediate reaction of the political parties in Great Britain was, quite naturally, to attempt to bring divisive issues, such as the Irish question, within the terms of a compromise; and John Redmond acceded to Asquith's request on 15 September for a moratorium on the discussion of Irish affairs. But Redmond himself had little control over the new kind of nationalism that was developing in Ireland in the early twentieth century. The leaders of the Irish Nationalist movement had, since 1870, assumed the validity of the Act of Union and had organized their tactics and strategy within the framework of the United Kingdom parliament; but in 1898 Arthur Griffith founded the Sinn Féin* movement, and advocated a method whereby the elected representatives of Ireland, instead of attending at Westminster, should assemble in Dublin and there initiate a national economic and social programme which would rebuild the fortunes of their country. There were others who wanted to go a stage further. The Irish Republican Brotherhood, founded in 1858, claimed to be the guardian of the republican tradition in Ireland, and existed for revolutionary action; and a group of these separatists resolved that before the end of the war, Ireland's natural right to independence should be asserted by force. The first act of physical defiance took place on 24 April 1916, when Patrick Pearse announced from the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin that a provisional government of the Republic had been established, and called upon the Irish people 'in the name of God and of the dead generations' to support the fight for the independence of their country.²⁵

To the ordinary Englishman, the Easter Rebellion was a wanton blow aimed at England and the cause of freedom; and it is probably fair to say

*Sinn Féin' means 'ourselves', and expressed the economic and political self-sufficiency which Griffith hoped to achieve. The best account of the origin and rise of the Sinn Féin movement is in R. M. Henry, *The Evolution of Sinn Féin* (Dublin, 1920).

that British opinion approved of the executions of the leaders of the rebellion in May 1916.* *Punch's* Fenian dynamiter was now transformed into a dachshund clad in a German spiked helmet and labelled 'Sinn Féin'.²⁶ But the rebellion could not be dismissed as merely another example of Irish 'disloyalty' and 'brutality', on a par with Fenian outrages or agrarian crime; for, as George Bernard Shaw reminded Englishmen in an article published in the *New Statesman* on 6 May, one of the morals of the Irish rising was:

Be very careful what political doctrine you preach. You may be taken at your word in the most unexpected directions.

I wonder how many of those who have made such resounding propaganda of Sinn Féin for small nationalities for twenty months past have died heroically for their principles in the burning ruins of the General Post Office in Sackville street!²⁷

This was a shrewd observation; for the Rising had taken place in the middle of a war fought ostensibly for the rights of small nations, and it was an act of defiance against one of the warring powers. And, apart from moral considerations, it was necessary to attempt some kind of settlement of the Irish difficulty so that the British war effort would not be hindered by serious internal divisions. When Asquith announced in the House of Commons on 25 May that he had authorized the Minister of Munitions, Lloyd George, to initiate fresh negotiations with the leaders of Irish opinion,²⁸ the leading organs of English Unionist opinion found it expedient to support the Prime Minister's proposal. Lord Northcliffe's newspapers, the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, were swung behind the cause of settlement,²⁹ and the *Observer* had already anticipated Asquith's appeal for unity when it wrote on 14 May that 'Home Rule will undoubtedly conduce to the greater moral integrity and practical security of the United Kingdom and to the strength and welfare of the Empire as a whole'.

The apparent unanimity of Unionist opinion moved the *Morning Post* to complain about the efforts of British newspapers to 'stampede British opinion';³⁰ however, there can be little doubt that the negotiations which Lloyd George opened with Sir Edward Carson and John Redmond in May 1916 had general public support. But the problem was not one that could be settled between Liberal ministers and the representatives of Irish Nationalist and Unionist opinion; for in May 1915, after persistent pressure from the Opposition, Asquith had broadened the base of his

*Judging from an examination of the British press in the days immediately following the Rising.

administration by admitting a section of the Unionist Party to power. The Unionists in the Coalition had at first acquiesced in the 1916 negotiations: Walter Long, for example, had written warmly to Lloyd George on 23 May to express his conviction that 'you can render a service to Ireland, G. Britain and the Empire, the extent of which no man can reason'.³¹ But when Lloyd George seemed in sight of a settlement based upon home rule for twenty-six counties, excluding the six north-eastern counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone,³² some Unionist members of the Cabinet drew back in alarm. The frightening thing was the immediate prospect of a parliament in Dublin, for, as Lloyd George himself admitted, once home rule actually came into operation, 'it can never be gone back upon.'³³ Lord Selborne wrote to Lloyd George on 16 June denying that he had ever given his assent to any policy which included the immediate application of home rule, and when Asquith refused to repudiate the Lloyd George plan, Selborne resigned from the Board of Agriculture. On 27 June Walter Long and Lord Lansdowne attacked the settlement in the Cabinet, arguing that the concession of home rule would be regarded as a surrender to force which would only invite further pressure. Other Unionists, however, including A. J. Balfour and Bonar Law, supported the government's proposals, and a deadlock, with more Unionist resignations and a possible break-up of the Coalition, seemed imminent. But Asquith and his colleagues yielded to Unionist pressure. A committee was appointed to formulate any modifications to the proposed settlement that the Unionists might think necessary; Lord Lansdowne's demand that the Defence of the Realm regulations be strengthened was accepted; and on 22 July the Unionists insisted that the retention of Irish members at Westminster, which Redmond had regarded as a guarantee of the provisional character of the arrangement, should be deleted, and the settlement taken as permanent. These proposals were conveyed to Redmond, and on 24 July in the House of Commons he acknowledged that all hope of a settlement was over.³⁴

English Unionism had asserted itself successfully once again; but despite the failure of the 1916 negotiations, the situation could not remain the same. For one thing, the bulk of British public opinion had declared itself firmly in favour of a settlement; and the *Round Table* believed also that the majority of Unionists had realized the need for some kind of home rule.³⁵ There was no gainsaying the fact that leading Unionists, men such as Balfour and Bonar Law, now urged the necessity of a compromise solution: at a meeting of the party on 7 July 1916 Balfour reminded his colleagues that the home rule act 'however passed, is passed',

and Law warned that there was no possibility of fighting 'on the clear issue of the repeal of the Home Rule Bill'.³⁶ The opponents of a settlement did not dare maintain otherwise: even Lord Selborne admitted that he was prepared to give home rule a fair trial after the war.³⁷ After 1916 the question was not whether England would concede or withhold home rule, but the kind of relationship that a self-governing Ireland would hold with the rest of the United Kingdom; and when next the Irish question was taken up, home rule was the starting-point and not the goal.

The clock could not be put back to pre-war days; nor could it be stopped at 1916. The pressures of war continued to impel Unionists towards compromise, and the decision of the United States of America to enter the conflict made it necessary for the government to tackle once again the question 'which is at the root of most of our troubles with the United States'.³⁸ On 16 May 1917 Lloyd George, by now Prime Minister, addressed a letter to John Redmond in which he made two alternative proposals for a settlement of the Irish question. The first of these was that a bill should be introduced providing for the application of the home rule act of 1914, subject to an amendment under which the six north-eastern counties of Ulster were to be excluded from its operation for five years; the second, an Irish Convention, representing all shades of Irish opinion for the purpose of devising a scheme for Irish self-government. Redmond accepted the second alternative; and on 25 July 1917, the convention commenced its deliberations.³⁹

The Convention was, as Lord Curzon told the House of Lords, 'as much a war measure as are any of the emergency Acts which you have assisted to pass into law during the last three years';⁴⁰ but it proved to be an unsuccessful one. It deliberated from July 1917 until May 1918, and produced a report; but the refusal of Sinn Féin to attend gave its deliberations an air of unreality, and its report was peppered with minority protests repudiating the recommendations on which the majority agreed.⁴¹ The failure of the Convention to find substantial agreement between the participating groups* meant that the initiative in discovering an Irish settlement was passed back to the British government, and in April 1918 English Unionists had once again, as in April 1916, to face the issue of Irish self-government.

Their reactions to this situation revealed that, by the spring of 1918,

*The Unionists of the south of Ireland, however, did make conciliatory moves towards the Irish Nationalists; but their spokesman, Lord Midleton, was later repudiated by a section of the Irish Unionist Alliance, the southern Unionist organization (Earl of Midleton, *Records and Reactions, 1856-1939* [London, 1939], pp. 253-4).

England's case against home rule was all but lost. On 10 April 1918 Austen Chamberlain wrote to Lord Hugh Cecil that 'the old Unionist policy has become impossible—not because it was wrong but because the British people will not consistently follow it for a sufficient length of time to give it a fair chance of success'. He went on:

Your father was right in principle when he spoke of the need for twenty years of resolute Government, though I think he underestimated the time required even then. But it is clear that we cannot count on 20 or even ten years of a consistent anti-Home Rule policy by the British electorate.⁴²

Austen Chamberlain's remarks are significant, not only for the light they throw on the attitude of a Unionist spokesman, but also because of their implications. Chamberlain, although stressing the need for a change of policy towards Ireland, had not, at bottom, abandoned his Unionist principles. On the contrary, he was careful to reaffirm his belief that the Unionist policy was best, and to point out that he was only shifting his ground because public apathy had made it impossible to bring it to a successful conclusion. Chamberlain had become a 'home ruler' on grounds of expediency, not of principle; and he was not the only one to argue in such terms. In 1917, Maurice Headlam, Treasury Remembrancer and Deputy Paymaster for Ireland, wrote to a number of young Members of Parliament, arguing that the Irish Convention was an undesirable experiment and urging them to maintain the Union. His appeal brought replies from, amongst others, Sir Henry Craik,* Edward Wood† and John Hills,‡ all of whom refused to commit themselves to a *non possumus* attitude and spoke in favour of a reasonable and generally acceptable solution of the Irish question. But these replies were based upon the same premise as Austen Chamberlain's letter to Lord Hugh Cecil. Sir Henry Craik admitted that Headlam's argument was 'full of the soundest sense' and that the Union was 'absolutely right'; and he explained that he only supported the Convention 'under the urgent pressure of war and in the hope ... that some settlement, even if it were not on a durable foundation, would probably help us in an emergency when all possible help is needed'. John Hills put forward a similar line of argument, and Edward Wood was convinced that public opinion had 'left for ever the old, strict Unionist orthodoxy'. An appeal from Headlam to Sir Samuel Hoare elicited a reply

*Unionist M.P. for Glasgow and Aberdeen Universities.

†Unionist M.P. for Ripon division of Yorkshire; later 1st Earl of Halifax.

‡Unionist M.P. for Durham City, 1906–8 and again in 1918.

couched in language almost identical to that of Austen Chamberlain: 'Without a generation of resolute government the Union is impossible and I am convinced that in the quick changes of English politics there is never going to be any resolute government of Ireland for any considerable time.'⁴³ On 15 April 1918 Sir Ian Malcolm* explained to Lloyd George that 'a considerable number of the younger generation of Conservatives are by no means disinclined for a measure of Home Rule, as a War Measure'.⁴⁴

But the acceptance of home rule as a 'War Measure' was not the same thing as the acceptance of home rule because English Unionists were convinced of the justice of Irish claims to self-government. Lord Salisbury had maintained in 1889 that the great majority of Englishmen would never concede Irish home rule unless their political instincts suddenly changed, and that only a violent upheaval could achieve this:

Nations do not change their political nature like that, except through blood. It would require a subordination of all ordinary motives, a renunciation of traditions and prepossessions, a far-reaching and disciplined resolve, which is never engendered by mere persuasion, but only comes after conflict and under the pressure of military force.⁴⁵

The shifting trends of English opinion between 1914 and 1918 had demonstrated the accuracy of Salisbury's observation. English Unionists had first shown signs of compromise in 1914, when the danger of civil war seemed imminent. The 1916 Rising had resulted in a further weakening in Unionist resolve; and the pressure of the Great War had proved to be the most effective catalyst of all, causing life-long Unionists to abandon their policies in the belief that an Irish settlement was necessary for the survival of the British empire in the greatest conflict in which it had ever been engaged. What reasoned argument and persistent propaganda had failed to achieve for the cause of home rule in thirty years, the pressure of world war had accomplished in four.

But although English Unionists were changing their policies, they had not changed their convictions. In the spring of 1918 the British government was anxious to introduce military conscription into Ireland, and the Liberal and Labour sections of the Coalition made it clear that they would only sanction this step if home rule were also introduced as a consolation prize.⁴⁶ On 15 April 1918 the government set up a Cabinet committee to frame a measure of self-government for Ireland, and the Unionists in the

*Malcolm was a former secretary of the Union Defence League.

Coalition again faced the prospect of coming to terms with the establishment of some kind of Irish legislature, which they had always argued would be a half-way house to separation. In order to find some means of reconciling their principles with the new set of facts that confronted them in 1918, English Unionists turned their thoughts to another scheme of Irish self-government. That scheme was federalism—the establishment of regional parliaments in the United Kingdom, which would handle purely local matters but would be subject to an imperial parliament at Westminster for the conduct of policy common to all, such as defence, foreign affairs and customs.

The advantages of a federal solution for the Irish question had been strongly argued by the influential Round Table group of Liberal-imperialists between 1912 and 1914, but had been resisted with equal strength by Unionists such as L. S. Amery and A. J. Balfour, who objected to federalism on the grounds that the Irish would use their parliament in order to gain further concessions and, finally, independence.⁴⁷ But now, in their extremity, Unionists discovered a new virtue in the federal system. Walter Long was convinced that the ‘old kind’ of home rule was as ‘dead as Queen Anne’ and that federalism was ‘the only substitute’,⁴⁸ and even L. S. Amery was now prepared to admit that the Prime Minister should introduce ‘not an Irish bill but a “United Kingdom” bill, definitely providing for the establishment of a series of National Parliaments’.⁴⁹

Unionists could produce cogent arguments for their conversion to the federal principle. Austen Chamberlain believed that

the vast accumulation of work produced by the war, and of new problems raised by it, make it impossible that one Parliament should adequately discharge all the duties that have to be performed for the whole of the United Kingdom, let alone for the Empire, and that after the war we shall be in imminent danger of an utter break-down of Parliament unless in the interval we have advanced a long way towards devolution.⁵⁰

L. S. Amery argued that Ulster’s case for exclusion would be ‘completely modified if the measure is one which gives real guarantees for the permanence of the United Kingdom as a single sovereign unit’;⁵¹ and Austen Chamberlain added another make-weight: a federal reorganization of the

*Frederick Guest, Coalition Liberal Chief Whip, put the number of Unionists who supported a federal solution at 100 in May 1918; other estimates varied between 80 and 120. Guest also thought that public opinion ‘leans in the direction of Federalism’ (Guest to Lloyd George, 3 May 1918, Lloyd George MSS, F 21/2/20).

United Kingdom would put an end to 'the interminable wrangle about Irish representation at Westminster'.⁵²

This was sensible enough; but such arguments were only a rationalization—one of which the *New Statesman* exposed when it commented that 'those who demanded a federalist solution of the Irish question ... seem for the most part to be attempting to standardise a form of extended local government within the United Kingdom rather than aiming at satisfying the national aspirations of the Irish people'.⁵³ Federalism was something which enabled English Unionists to concede self-government to Ireland and yet resist any implication that they were thereby acknowledging the existence of an Irish nation; for a federal scheme, applied equally to the whole of the United Kingdom, was consistent with the assertion that there was one British nation, and that that nation was being politically reorganized. In the words of A. V. Dicey, there 'would not be the same obvious and patent failure in the efforts of British statesmanship to unite all the British Isles into one country; the continuity of English history would be to a certain extent preserved; the break with the past would be lessened'.⁵⁴ Federalism was but English Nationalism watered down. The *Observer* wrote on 20 May 1917 that 'Ireland must claim equal nationality amongst the constituent nationalities of the United Kingdom, but cannot for a moment claim to be an altogether superior and privileged nationality', and the *Yorkshire Post* declared that 'Unionists have never been hostile to an extension of local government in Ireland, Scotland, Wales or England ... but they object, strenuously, to a Home Rule policy based on separatist ideas, and leading, directly and naturally, to Ireland's establishment as an independent nation'.⁵⁵

It was this kind of argument which caused the *Manchester Guardian* to observe that there was 'a fundamental difference between Home Rule that is advocated, as Gladstone advocated the cause of Ireland, out of sympathy with a nationality that had been denied its just expression, and Home Rule conceded not on the ground of nationality but as a measure of improving the efficiency of collective government'.⁵⁶ But it must be admitted that those sections of British opinion which were traditionally sympathetic to the cause of Irish self-rule had developed their ideas remarkably little beyond those of Gladstone's generation. As far as English home rulers

*Lord Selborne urged Walter Long to call any scheme of Irish self-government that the government might produce 'a Bill for the Better Government of the United Kingdom' rather than a 'Government of Ireland Act Amendment Bill', because the latter title 'is calculated today more than ever to arouse the resentment of all Unionists' (Selborne to Austen Chamberlain, 31 May 1918, enclosing copy of a letter from Selborne to Long, 31 May 1918, Austen Chamberlain MSS, 15/1/33-4).

were concerned, the course of events in Ireland during the war had only served as a final proof of their contention that a self-governing Ireland would have been a loyal and contented Ireland; but although they could feel some degree of self-satisfaction about this, in other ways they had little cause for complacency. English home rulers, no less than English Unionists, betrayed a remarkable inelasticity of mind when they came to confront the Irish question. Asquith had been a member of Gladstone's ministry in 1893 when the second home rule bill was introduced, and when he put forward his own bill in 1912, the only alteration of any importance was the reduction of the authority of the proposed Irish parliament. Lloyd George had been a member of Asquith's administration in 1912; and the only significant difference in his home rule plans of 1916 and 1917 was a definite provision for the exclusion of some part of the province of Ulster.

It is tempting to adopt as an explanation of this inflexibility the attitude of mind embodied in George Bernard Shaw's Tom Broadbent in *John Bull's Other Island*—that British Liberal opinion owed home rule 'not to the Irish, but to our English Gladstone'. But another analyst of the English temperament, A. V. Dicey, perhaps came nearer the truth when he remarked: 'A home Ruler asks not for the political separation, but for the political partnership of England and Ireland. He wishes not that the firm should be dissolved, but that the Articles of Association should be revised.'⁵⁷

The principle underlying the bills of 1886, 1893 and 1912 was the political unity of the British Isles; for English Liberals could not, any more than English Unionists, bring themselves to think in terms of an Ireland existing outside the political structure of the United Kingdom. It was true that, as the *Manchester Guardian* remarked in 1918, Gladstone wished to concede home rule on the grounds of nationality; but it was equally true that he did not perceive in that nationality anything more than a 'local patriotism', similar to that of the other component nations of the British Isles. The Irishman was 'more profoundly Irish', but it did not follow that 'because his local patriotism is keen, he is incapable of Imperial patriotism'. The concession of local self-government, Gladstone insisted, was 'not the way to sap or impair, but the way to strengthen and consolidate unity';⁵⁸ and in his policy lay 'A great opportunity of putting an end to the controversy of 700 years ... and of knitting together, by bonds firmer and higher in their character than those which heretofore we have mainly used, the hearts and affections of this people and the noble fabric of the British Empire.'⁵⁹

This outlook dominated the thinking of Gladstone's successors. It was

true that English home rulers did not agree with the contention that the Irish question was essentially one of an administrative reorganization which was common to the whole of the British Isles; but neither did they acknowledge the existence of a distinctive Irish nation with a culture and tradition essentially different from that of the rest of the nations that made up the United Kingdom. Nature had made the British Isles a unit; and Asquith stated in 1912 that it was his intention to join 'the hand of man with the hand of Nature to bring about for the first time in deed as well as in name a united Kingdom'.⁶⁰ It was for this reason that English Liberals did not fundamentally revise their opinions about Irish self-government between 1886 and 1918, but were content to rely on the orthodox home rule schemes of the nineteenth century. And this orthodoxy was not only held by English Liberalism. Even the British Labour Party, which might have been expected to bring a relatively fresh approach to the Irish question, found it difficult to emancipate its thinking, and in July 1918 could not produce an Irish policy more adventurous than the threadbare scheme of 'home rule all round'.⁶¹

But in 1918 it was becoming increasingly obvious that even such limited forms of self-government could no longer, with safety, be introduced into Ireland. The British government's attempt to combine military conscription with the enactment of a home rule bill only revealed to Irishmen the poverty of the whole home rule movement, and served to confirm the political ascendancy of Sinn Féin. Moreover, the government's decision, announced on 20 June 1918, not to proceed any longer with the dual policy was an admission that it was no longer dealing with a body of Irish Nationalists who were prepared to accept the supremacy of the imperial parliament, but was now confronted with a revolutionary movement that rejected the policy of co-operation with Great Britain and regarded the Union as a crime against the Irish nation.⁶² The general election of December 1918 confirmed that that part of the United Kingdom which was to receive home rule firmly rejected both that policy and its adherents. Sinn Féin candidates contested every constituency and won seventy-three seats, while the Irish Parliamentary Party secured only six.* The results were not as impressive as they first appeared, for Sinn Féin was unopposed in twenty-six constituencies and got less than one half of the votes cast in the remainder;⁶³ but it could not be denied that Sinn Féin represented

*Of the six, only two, John Dillon and Captain Redmond (the son of John Redmond), defeated Sinn Féin candidates. The other four were returned as a result of an agreement with Sinn Féin (McDowell, *The Irish Convention*, p. 192. Bibliographical details of all books, when not supplied in the footnotes, are given in the Bibliography).

Nationalist opinion in Ireland, and that it represented it in a spirit very different from that of the old Parliamentary Party. Sinn Féin's election manifesto stated that Ireland's claim to self-rule was 'not based on any accidental situation arising from the war. It is older than many if not all of the present belligerents ... based on our unbroken tradition of nationhood ... on our possession of a distinctive national culture and social order'. Sinn Féin stood 'less for a political party than for the Nation', and claimed to represent 'the old tradition of nationhood handed on from dead generations'. 'The right of a nation', the manifesto asserted, 'to sovereign independence rests upon immutable natural law and cannot be made the subject of a compromise.'⁶⁴

'The right of a nation ... cannot be made the subject of a compromise'. When this phrase, couched in the language of the Irish revolutionary tradition of 1798 and 1848, is compared to the Coalition government's vaguely worded promise of home rule, it is clear how remote from England Nationalist Ireland had become. Englishmen were 'all Home Rulers' by 1918, but this policy no longer provided a solution to the Irish question. England's failure to discover such a solution, Nicholas Mansergh has written, 'was not a failure for which this or that statesman could be held responsible, but it was a failure in the political conception of a nation'.⁶⁵